

The Approach of the Southern Writer to His Material

By Andrew Lytle

IN the middle twenties the Southern literary climate was singularly arid. Everything the South, in its historic role, had stood for was overwhelmed by its military defeat, the immediate evidence of which was the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover prosperity. The Southern scene, when it was used at all, was used to produce cultural buffoons for the amusement of the rest of the country. But what was most dishonorable of all—those who pretended to cultural leadership in the South, especially the Southern liberals, went out of their way to expose the buffoonery. It was the time of the Dayton trial and H. L. Mencken. His famous reference to the South as a culture, "The Sahara of the Bozarts," defined fairly accurately the condition of Southern letters. This school of opinion held the attitude, if such can be imagined, of Peeping Tom setting up for a moralist.

So it was that a young man looking about for guidance in literary matters could not find it at home. He was forced to flee to New York. It was here that all bent on a literary life must go, not only from the South but from every region. There was one notable exception: The Fugitive group of poets at Nashville. But

in this group even, all were not sure of their relation to their environment. At any rate the problem of the poet and his audience is a simpler matter than, for example, that of a would-be dramatist. And at that time I was bent on the theater.

After one year of farming I went to New Haven, to Baker's school of drama, for instruction. His 47 Workshop had a wide and justly deserved reputation for the training of successful playwrights. His advice to all beginners was to use the local scene, to write about people whose cultural background and the writer understood. This advice was sound as far as it went. But it presented a practical difficulty the moment the playwright, at least the Southern playwright, came to New York. He soon found out that he must disavow or satirize anything that was particularly Southern. This was not only true of the theater; it extended, with certain reservations, to every form of writing.

These conditions exposed the worst form of provincialism. They demanded of every writer from "the provinces" a complete abandonment of his natural point of view. He must cut himself off from his place of nativity and become a New Yorker. He must write about what the metropolis was interested in at the moment or pretend

that what was particularly New England confined universal experience. This pressure led, of course, to literary suicide. No other capital makes such impossible demands of its artists. A man of talent going from the province of Brittany to Paris, for example, would not only not listen to any such proposal; he would not believe it possible to be made. The capital should be the head where all is made articulate. The failure of New York as a literary capital lies in its organic deficiency: it is a head without a body. Its only connection with the many regions back of it is an economic one.

During this time I supported myself by acting on the legitimate stage during the winter and in stock during the summer. All the while I was constantly puzzled and depressed by the dilemma: either to give in to the colonial state of mind and write what New York wanted to hear about the South, or to cease writing altogether. I did not realize that there was an alternative, because like most Southern people I was very ignorant of Southern history and what its cultural tradition had to offer to the arts. It was only when I began to work on a life of General Forrest that I became aware of the richness of this tradition and its possibilities.

As the writer looks at his material, he will find two dominant cultural strains which support the complexity of Southern life: the formal European inheritance and the frontier. The conservative instincts of the one confronted by the elemental violence of the other gave the peculiar tone to a civilization unique in the early American Union. But there existed before the war and still exists the greatest diversity of local traditions, manners and speech. There is no such thing as the solid South from a cultural point of view. There have always been violent political and social distinctions, and if the would-be writer does not take them into consideration, he will find himself writing fantasy, and stories do not always have to be pretty to be fantastic.

The War Between the States, really the war between opposing civilizations, destroyed the Southern pattern while it was in the making. The serious writer who takes the pre-war South as his province must know that this was so, either intuitively or through study. Otherwise he will commit an anachronism: he will put into the mouths of people of another time the psychology of his own time. In this connection let me insist that it is not the novelist's business to have ideas about Southern society. He may have them as a man, but as a novelist his concern should be with human experience. But to render this experience he must know how people behave in a certain place at a certain time. It has been said that there are only a certain number of situations for dramatic treatment. The variety and the freshness comes from the form. The conditions of different societies will through their form give the needed freshness to the universal human predicaments out of which the best literature is made.

For these reasons I tried to render in "The Long Night" human experience objectively and dramatically. The leading motive for action was vengeance, and my principal concern as an author was to show the effects of vengeance, as they progressed, upon my protagonist's character. My secondary concern was to show how this consuming passion cut across the lives of a great many people at crucial moments; but each minor situation, directly or indirectly, had to advance the central plot. To bring the characters alive and make them perform in a society that had the illusion of reality, it was necessary to recreate the period immediately before and during the Civil War. How successful this was is not for me to say, but I was very careful that the up-country of Alabama should be used only as background.

The flaw in all sociological novels is the divided point of view. The author has a thesis to propound. He mixes the genres and thereby introduces the accidental and often the trivial into his work. That which is fiction renders the social criticism impure and that part which is social criticism false and weakens the purely creative. But his greatest sin will be against character. His characters will not behave as human beings caught in the coils of those universal predicaments for which there is no solution. And if this kind of material which makes a literature that is forever interesting. It is interesting because it presents the problem of evil, the insoluble problem and one which the mind never tires of contemplating. If the Southern novel keeps its form pure, the sense of craftsmanship high, it may well make for itself a permanent place in American literature.